

Dek Unu Magazine

Fine Photography



Joel Davidson
"A Common Thread"
March, 2019

Dek Unu Magazine

Eleven

This is **Dek Unu Magazine**. In Esperanto, *dek unu* means "eleven." Eleven Images from a single artist. Eleven artists in eleven solo issues each year.

Dek Unu publishes the work of a new photoartist in each issue. The artist's work and words are featured alone and in individual focus as the sole purpose for each issue of the magazine. Unlike other arts and letters magazines which might look for work from a variety of artists to support an editorial staff's theme, at **Dek Unu**, theme and imagery are always each artist's own.

Dek Unu seeks challenging, complex work that focuses and intensifies perception from artists who demonstrate accomplished technical craft and mature aesthetic vision.

This Month

For anyone who wonders where an open-minded, ecumenical, tolerant appreciation of the world's variety of religious experience has gone, here are the extraordinary documentary photographs of Joel Davidson. Working in both black-and-white and color, Davidson captures the human face of religious rituals, east, west, north and south, with consummate craft and deepest respect.

Since 1995, he has traveled a large fraction of the world with his cameras in hand and has assembled a giant catalog of gorgeous images that somehow illustrate both how large and how small the world is.



COMMUNION SUNDAY SAVANNAH, GA

On a Sunday morning walk to downtown Savannah, Georgia, I happened upon the First Bryan Baptist Church. The congregants were entering the church dressed in crisp white attire. I was casually dressed, but as I approached the entrance of the church, the usher welcomed me to join the service. I was graciously granted permission to photograph as long as I did not use flash. Feeling quite conspicuous, being the only Caucasian and considerably underdressed, I was greeted with much warmth and friendly smiles. The gospel music and energetic sermon delivered by the Pastor were uplifting. I was thrilled to be able to document this experience through my photography. This image is my favorite of the series. The facial expressions and gestures of welcome describe the atmosphere in the church. This church was founded in 1788 and is the oldest continuously-existing African American Baptist Church in America. The outfits of white dresses, hats and gloves make this image timeless. This photo could have been taken in the 1940's.





EASTER BONNET
NEW YORK, NY

At New York's Saint Patrick's Cathedral, on a beautiful Easter Sunday morning, many people strutted their Easter bonnets. This woman willingly posed for several people taking her picture with cell phones. I walked around to capture her in profile with the Cathedral in the background. I positioned the camera at my chest level to place her head above the crowd. I used a wide open f-stop to blur the heads behind her and to blur the church. Fortunately, I had great light!





MEA SHE'ARIM JERUSALEM, ISRAEL

Mea She'arim is an ultraorthodox Jewish neighborhood in Jerusalem. Large tour groups are not welcomed to visit the neighborhood or to photograph. I was fortunate to have an Israeli friend who accompanied me to the area. I so enjoyed the activities in the streets and synagogues that I returned to Mea She'arim many times that week. I was respectful, and the people I photographed accepted my presence and allowed me to take their images. This image was taken Friday afternoon before Shabbat. The man on the right had changed into his Shabbat dress clothes and is carrying his hat box. The man on the left is still in his weekday clothes. The gestures and the interaction between the two men make the viewer wonder what they are discussing. The cobblestone streets and the fencing give the image a sense of place.





ETHIOPIAN ISRAELI JEW – KOTEL
JERUSALEM, ISRAEL



The Western Wall (Kotel) in Jerusalem is the most religious site in the world for Jewish people. There are over 135,000 Ethiopian Jews that have immigrated to Israel and become citizens. In this image an Ethiopian Jew is praying in front of the Western Wall. He is draped with a tallit (prayer shawl) and the tefillin (leather boxes containing scrolls of parchment inscribed with verses from the Torah) are wrapped around his arm and head.

This image was taken with a wide open aperture to blur the background. My intention was for the viewer's eyes to concentrate on the main subject.



FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION ISTANBUL, TURKEY

I met an Israeli photographer friend in Istanbul. We rented an Airbnb in a residential neighborhood and spent the week walking and taking public transportation around Istanbul. Neither of us spoke Turkish and we didn't encounter many people who spoke English. We felt very safe and the Turkish people were very friendly. They usually consented to having their pictures taken. We walked by this mosque and no one objected to my photographing. I studied this scene before taking this image. The toy beside the child and the grandson holding his grandfather's cane told a story. I included the shoe rack, other worshippers, and the classic Turkish architecture in order to place the story and to enhance its atmosphere.







MORNING PRAYER
KOMPONG CHAM, WAT NOKOR, CAMBODIA

While visiting Kompong Cham with a tour, I wandered away from the group. I came upon a Buddhist monk, alone, in a temple drinking tea and reading his morning prayers. I respectfully stood in the doorway and he motioned for me to enter. I removed my shoes and sat down facing him. I motioned to my camera and he nodded "yes." I then lay down on the floor to get a lower angle and positioned myself for the perspective that I desired. The monk looked up, smiled and posed, thinking that is what I wanted him to do. I snapped several posed photos. When he went back to being absorbed in his prayers, I was able to capture this image.



ROSARY BEADS LISBON, PORTUGAL

This image was taken in the 12th century Sé Cathedral of Lisbon, the city's most important and iconic religious building. I used a shallow depth of field and a 35mm lens. There is just enough definition in the background to see other people praying and to see the architecture of the church. The reverent worshiper's rosary beads, backpack, wallet, cane, notebook and glasses add to the story.





HINDU TEMPLE JAIPUR, INDIA

This Hindu Temple is one of many in Jaipur. People come to the Temple at 9:30AM to meditate and chant mantras to set positive intentions for a beautiful day. The main focal point of the image is the three men praying, but the scene caught my eye for its triangles, circles, rectangles and vertical columns. On the column in the foreground, the Hindi language is visible. I shot this image at 35mm at f/8 which keeps everything in focus.







AARTI CEREMONY VARANASI, INDIA

The Ganges River is considered sacred by Hindus. The river is personified as the goddess Ganga. The riverbank is the site of worship including ritual bathing and cremations. The Aarti Ceremony, pictured here, is performed nightly (7 nights/week) in Varanasi. It is a spiritual ritual using fire as an offering made to the goddess of the holiest river in India. The five people in this image display different gestures, expressions, and attitudes - one has prayerful hands, one is bowing, one has raised hands, one has hands in front of her mouth and one has an expression of intense emotion.

We spent three nights in Varanasi and I went back to the river every evening taking pictures. Here priests (in red) make fire offerings. I could spend weeks photographing there!





KYOTO MONK
KYOTO, JAPAN



I traveled from Tokyo to Kyoto by bullet train and hired a guide for two days. On the first day, I told the guide I was very interested in photographing monks. He made a few phone calls and was able to arrange for us to visit The Reverend Norioki Kunitomo in his home. I was very impressed to see pictures displayed of The Reverend Kunitomo with the Dali Lama and another image with the Pope. I explained my interest in photography and he was very willing to allow me to make the images that I desired.

The lighting for this image was a challenge. The inside of the home was dark and the outside was bright. This is the only image in this series that I used a strobe. I exposed for the outside and bounced a strobe off the back left upper corner of the room. I tried to make it appear that there was an open wall on my left that was lighting the room. I am pleased that the image does not appear to be artificially lit.



FUNERAL PROCESSION DAYERE, HAITI

This image of a Haitian Catholic funeral procession was taken just last month in the impoverished rural mountain village of Dayere. I was there to attend the opening dedication of The Haitian Health Foundation's new medical clinic, the blue building in the background. I took a number of images of this funeral procession as it passed by the clinic. This image is the best of the series because it shows the whole environment with many elements and layers to see without appearing cluttered: the face of the man in the foreground, the man playing the handmade drum, the unblocked view of the boy holding the casket, the additional men that comprise the procession, the school with the flag, and the Haitian Health Foundation clinic.





Artist Interview - Joel Davidson

Hi, Joel. Welcome to Dek Unu. A great idea for a series!

The well-known quote, "variety is the spice of life," is the underlying theme of this collection of photographs. Each image displays some form of spiritual expression. The clothing choices vary and the customary rituals are distinct, but the connection to each group's spirituality is the common thread. We are all part of humanity. Our eclectic styles of expression contribute to the "spice" that makes life together fascinating. The eleven images include five religions, eight countries, six group shots, five environmental portraits, seven BW images and four color images.

The need for racial and religious tolerance is a major conversation in the U.S. right now. Your view?

I saw a quote on Facebook a few weeks ago – "America is a Christian Nation." I was very disturbed by this quote. Our First Amendment states "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." I strongly feel religious tolerance is important for society to thrive. I look at these images and I see goodness and reverence in all the people pictured no matter their religion, race, or country of origin.



© Joel Davidson

Your work is both well-crafted and aesthetically well-seen. Fine art or formal photo training in your background?

I was a science major at Bates College and unfortunately only took one compulsory art course. I am mostly a self-taught photographer. Photography became my serious hobby in 1958 when I received a polaroid camera for my 13th birthday. I loved the instant gratification of seeing my images. Polaroid film was very expensive and I learned to compose and expose well, not to waste any film. In the 1960s, I had switched to a manual Canon camera and used Kodachrome ASA25 (ISO25) slide film. Correct exposure was critical since the slide film was unforgiving. I took my first trip to Yellowstone using this slide film. Original Kodachrome color is magnificent and I still enjoy looking at my old slides.

In 1995, I made my first major photography trip to Nepal. Since then I've travelled around the United States, Central and South America, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and the Far East, always with camera(s) in hand. In addition to "learning by doing," I have over 100 photography books and enjoy looking at the images of accomplished photographers. I carefully study these images to see why they are so effective. I also enjoy going to museums to look at realistic paintings. I study composition, poses, lighting.

I strive to convey the emotions and feelings of people by capturing their expressions and gestures. In doing so, I hope to relate a story and elicit emotion from the viewer. I immerse myself into the culture around me and try to build rapport with an individual before asking permission to take a photo. This approach often affords me the opportunities to photograph images that most tourists never experience.



Having been all over the world, do you have a favorite place to work? More than one favorite?

India is a tourist and photographer's dream. The bright colors, religious chants, luxurious textiles, flavorful foods and sweet floral aromas awaken our senses. I am ordinarily very selective taking images. In a day of photographing, I usually use a small portion of one memory card. However, one day in Jaipur, I hired a bicycle rickshaw to take me around neighborhoods and small alleyways and by 2:00PM I had taken 128G of images!

Your approach to "travel" photography is not typical.

I prefer to photograph alone when I am doing street or documentary photography. I find an interesting location with "good" light and wait for something to happen in this "scene." I can hang out in one location for hours. Patience is an important component in capturing interesting street images. Sometimes I am rewarded and often times I do not get the desired image. Most travel photographers want to snap a picture and move on to the next location.

My last overseas trip was to Lisbon, Portugal. I have seen many BW images of Lisbon and was inspired to spend a week photographing in the city. I rented an Airbnb in a residential neighborhood. I hired a local guide and explained what type of images I wanted to take. She led me around the city by walking and taking public transportation. I was fortunate that Liliana, my guide, had the patience to "hang out" in coffee shops and on street corners in the rain while I took the time to see and capture my images.

As a lecturer and juror you have judged more than a few photographs. What makes a good documentary photo?

I judge an image first by its impact. Does it evoke an intense emotion that draws a viewer in or is it a "walk by" image? Does the image draw the viewer's eyes to the center of interest and then prompt him/her to look at the other elements? Does the

composition, lighting, etc., work together to enhance the image? Is it technically correct without being over-manipulated?

Over a long career, you've gone from film to digital. Talk about changes in your gear and your methods.

After my early start with Polaroid and the Kodachrome years with my Canon SLR, I used a medium format Hasselblad for my 1995 trip to Nepal. The camera was manual, shot 2.25" square negatives, and had interchangeable film backs. I kept BW film in one back and color film in the other back. I was forced to think ahead about whether an image would look better in BW or color.

I have now switched to digital photography. I have total control from composition and exposure to digital burning and dodging, and printing. I currently travel with two digital Leica cameras, one over each shoulder – a color camera and a monochrome camera. The cameras are manual focusing and I shoot in manual mode. If I don't feel color helps to tell my story, I shoot in BW.

The Leica Monochrome is the only digital camera without a Bayer filter. The Monochrome camera has greater luminosity and the prints look more like film. Ninety-five percent of my travel/ documentary images are shot with a 35mm or 50mm prime lens without a strobe. They are very fast lenses; the 50mm lens is f/0.95 and the 35mm lens is f/1.4. When these lenses are wide open, I can blur the background..

Your portraits, both candid and posed, are so well made!

Portraiture has become my favorite genre. I also loved photographing wildlife and done quite a bit of it. The problem is that I need to fly a long way and carry heavy, long lenses. I've also done some landscape, but landscape doesn't excite me as much. One of my daughters (she was an art major in college) would say to me "Dad - I hope you're not going to photograph another cheesy sunset." I feel a person in an image adds an



important element. I can do street photography anyplace. I can take a train into NYC, walk around taking images for a day with one small camera and one lens, and return home the same day.

Many photographers are inexperienced or insecure about posed portraits. Technical tips?

When I shoot in the studio, I tether the camera to a computer with a large monitor. The picture is immediately available on-screen. I can check exposure and focus. After a few shots, I show the images to the subject. We can collaborate together to make changes in position, hair, etc. Most of the time, I keep the lighting simple. I usually use a large key (main) light positioned to the side to feather the light. I place a large white piece of foam core on the opposite side to reflect light back on the shadow (short) side. If I use a black backdrop, I will use a hair light. My studio has a black floor, black ceiling and grey walls. The wall that I use for a backdrop has black carpet. I can totally control the light with no color reflections.

I took a wonderful week-long wedding portrait class with Jerry Ghionis. I was the only participant that doesn't shoot weddings. (I never will - If I go to a wedding, I leave my camera home). Jerry is considered one of the top five wedding photographers in the world. I learned a tremendous amount about using available light and posing from Jerry.

When I photograph women, I always try to make them look as beautiful as possible but also look natural. I will never shoot a woman straight on. I will have them:

- turn their body away from the light
- point toe that is closest to the light toward the camera
- move that leg forward and then slide the heel back
- weight on back leg with that hip back and rotated
- chest forward - shoulders back, arch back
- turn face toward light, chin up
- arms should be off body. wrist and hands bent - soft fingers

Men can be harder to pose. Chest and shoulders define a man. I will ask a man to stand at an angle with his head turned toward to the camera. I try to achieve a strong jaw line. Most of the time, I will photograph men and woman from the short (darker) side. It makes them look thinner.

Street or studio, how do you put them at ease? How do you make it natural and spontaneous?

I was very shy growing up. My father could be tough on me and he would say, "When I introduce you to someone, I expect you to look him in the eye, give him a firm handshake and say "It's nice to meet you Mr. Smith." I would dread when he would introduce me to someone. If I didn't do all three, I would get a stern lecture when we were in private. It was good training for when I became a dentist. I followed my father's advice for every new patient and I feel it helped me build rapport. I use the same technique when I ask a person to take their portrait. Being friendly and smiling goes a long way even in a foreign country when I have limited knowledge of the local language. Many people say "no" to me. I don't take the rejection personally. I always thank them and move on. If I am polite and say thank you, they may say "yes" to the next photographer. I've had people apologize for declining because they liked me, but didn't want their photo taken.



If I can get an email address when I take an image, I'll send the picture. If they are happy with it, I'll ask them if they want a print. I was in a friend's photo gallery in New Mexico. This couple walked in and I took a few images with their permission. This was unposed. The father was so excited with his daughter. They were so happy with the image, I sent them three 8x10s. One for them and one for each set of grandparents.



There's a strong social consciousness in all of your work, not just in this series.

Helping other people has always been a part of who I am. I'm a retired dentist from Tolland, Connecticut, and, although I no longer practice full-time, I continue to donate both my photography and my dental skills to good causes.

I published my first book "Faces of Haiti" in June, 2014, and my second book "Jerusalem - Observing the Observant" in December, 2015. I donated 100 copies of "Faces of Haiti" to the Haitian Health Foundation. The book was given as a thank you to large donors in a major fundraiser.

I have just returned from volunteering in Jeremie, Haiti. I have traveled to Haiti six times to volunteer my services as a dentist and I plan to continue my visits. While there, I walk through the streets and villages daily. I visit schools, hospitals and orphanages. I feel the genuine warmth of each smile and the joy of watching children laugh and play. I have taken many images and try to capture the essence of the individual and enable the viewer to feel the dignity, kindness, wisdom and spirit that I saw in the eyes of the Haitian people. I hope to do another photography book of Haitian images.



Closer to home, recently you are working with Pace Collier at Immokalee.

The Pace Center is an educational and social service provider for at-risk teenage girls in rural Florida. We connected with Pace through Wotts Mercy, a Special Projects Director at the center. Wotts (left below) is Haitian, brought to the US when she was four. She asked me to take Senior Portraits for five of the girls at the center who were unable to afford a photographer. I enjoyed it and the girls were wonderful! Bianka Guadean (right below) is a senior who graduated from Pace in January.



Please see details of Wotts Mercy's amazing life story at <https://news.wgcu.org/post/where-home-holidays-wotts-mercy>.

And more about the Pace Center here: <https://www.pacecenter.org/locations/collier-at-immokalee>

We routinely share links to artists' websites as part of Dek Unu interviews. The extraordinary range and volume of Joel Davidson's work must be seen to be appreciated.

Please see MUCH more of his work at:

Website: www.joeldavidsonimages.com

Blog: www.throughjoelslens.com



Dek Unu Arts

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